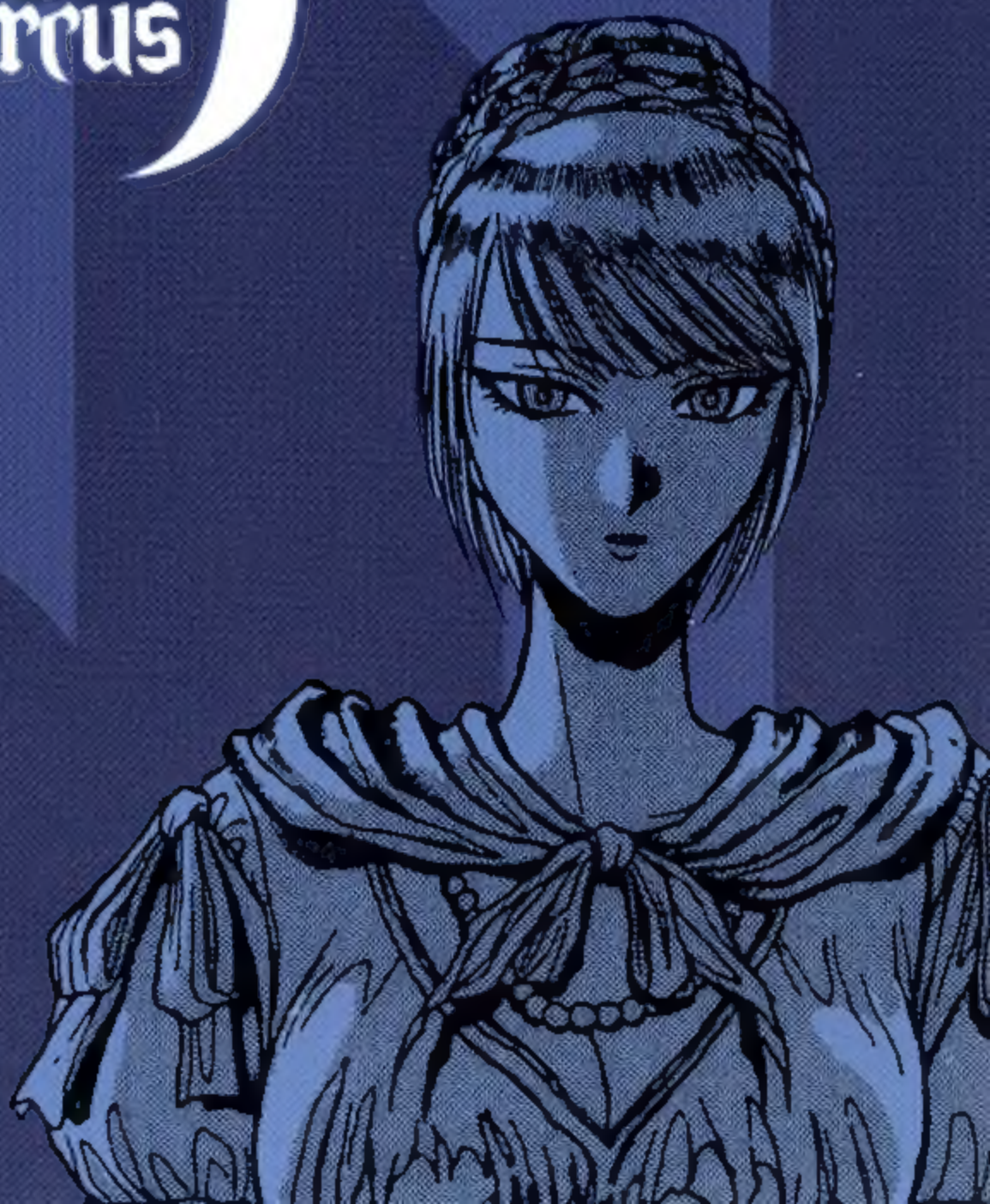
BLACKOUT

KAZUHIRO FUJITA

Karakuri Circus 9



karakuri circus

9

KAZUHIRO FUJITA

★ SUMMARY OF THE PREVIOUS VOLUMES ★

NARUMI KATO, A JAPANESE MARTIAL ARTIST TRAINED IN CHINA, WAS INVOLVED IN A SERIOUS ACCIDENT, DURING WHICH HE LOST AN ARM. BECAUSE OF THE ENSUING SHOCK, HE HAS PARTIALLY LOST HIS MEMORY AND NOW LIVES QUASI-INCOGNITO IN FRANCE.
A MAN NAMED GUY, WHO CONSIDERS HIMSELF A DOCTOR AND WHO IS ALSO CALLED "SHIROGANE", TELLS NARUMI OF THE LINKS BETWEEN THE AQUA VITAE, THE FAMOUS AND MIRACULOUS WATER OF THE ALCHEMISTS; ALL THE SHIROGANES; THE AUTOMATONS; AND THE TERRIBLE DISEASE, ZONAPHA'S SYNDROME. GUY'S HIDDEN AGENDA IS IN FACT TO FORCE NARUMI TO ALSO BECOME A SHIROGANE, A DESTRUCTOR OF AUTOMATONS.
AT FIRST, NARUMI OPPOSES GUY'S MACHINATIONS. BUT IN CARNAC, HE WITNESSES A GROUP OF EXTREMELY VIOLENT AUTOMATONS, WHO ABDUCT CHILDREN AND ENDANGER THEIR LIVES IN THE WORST WAY. HE THEN ENGAGES THE AUTOMATONS BARE-HANDED.
AFTER HIS VICTORY, HE DECIDES TO KEEP UP THE FIGHT IN ORDER TO ANNIHILATE THESE EVIL BEINGS WHO SPREAD ZONAPHA'S SYNDROME EVERYWHERE AND FEED ON THE BLOOD OF HUMANS TO ENSURE THEIR OWN SURVIVAL.
NARUMI IS THUS GOING TO OFFICIALLY BECOME A SHIROGANE, AND LUCILLE (THE OLDEST LIVING SHIROGANE) WILL FINALLY BE ABLE TO REVEAL TO HIM A TERRIBLE SECRET...

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VVHHHHH

A LONG TIME AGO...

...THERE STOOD MY VILLAGE.

ACT VIII : KARAKURI * MACHINERY
"ONCE UPON A TIME / I"

THE NAME OF THE VILLAGE WAS KER'LOIC.

IT HAS BEEN MORE THAN 200 YEARS NOW...

TANIA AND MARY LIVED THERE TOO.

THE WIND FROM THE SEA TO THE NORTHWEST WAS ALWAYS COLD

AND OUR VILLAGE WAS NOT RICH!

BUT... I LIKED IT JUST THE WAY IT WAS.

That is where I was born and raised.

BE CAREFUL, OKAY?

BYE, MOMMY!

I was a simple village woman, with a husband and two children, just like everyone else.

I'LL BRING YOU YOUR LUNCH IN A BIT.

ALRIGHT ...

LET'S GO...

... LUCILLE!

These two women were my childhood friends. Since men were lacking around the village, Tania had become the teacher of our village. Mary was a villager's wife, like me.

HEY! MARY, TANIA!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!

SO?

WHAT DID HE DO?

UNCLE JOHN JUST RAN ACROSS HIM...

LUCILLE, DID YOU HEAR THE LATEST ABOUT THE "MAN IN BLACK"?

He was a strange man who lived in a big castle away from the village...

The "man in black"! Everyone in the village knew about him, but nobody wanted to talk about it.

GOoOh

I did not know how long he had been living there.

In fact, I believe he was already there when I was a child.

I clearly remember the adults telling the children never to approach his castle.

SOME SAID HE DUG PITS IN THE CEMETARY.

SUCH AS?

STRANGE RUMORS ABOUT HIM WERE NUMEROUS!

BUT THE ADULTS DID NOT SEEM TO KNOW WHO THAT MAN REALLY WAS, EITHER.

I WONDER WHY THAT MAN WAS NEVER WORRIED, OR ACCUSED OF HERESY AND WITCHCRAFT...

DURING THOSE TIMES, SOME PROFESSIONS WERE STARTING TO MODERNIZE, BUT IN YOUR RURAL VILLAGE, MANY SUPERSTITIONS MUST HAVE STILL EXISTED...

OTHERS SAID THEY HAD HEARD HIM SCREAM MYSTERIOUS WORDS TOWARDS THE SKY.

I remember perfectly what Tania and Mary told me on that day.

When Uncle John, who was a miller, went home with a bag of flour on his shoulder, it was already night...

INDEED...

I told Mary that there was nothing strange about that. But she insisted, saying that the lady was extremely beautiful...

He saw the man in black taking a walk, accompanied by a beautiful young lady. We all knew, however, that this man lived alone.

...she never blinked, not even once!

... and also that...

SORRY, BUT I DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO THINK ABOUT THAT!

USUALLY, HE SEEMS PRETTY MUCH MUTE. ISN'T THAT STRANGE?!

REMEMBER THAT THE MAY FESTIVAL IS APPROACHING.

I HEARD THAT THE MAN TALKED TO THE LADY SEVERAL TIMES!

NOBODY CAN KEEP THEIR EYES OPEN INDEFINITELY!

HA HA HA! THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE! UNCLE JOHN MUST HAVE BEEN WRONG!

IN THE OLD DAYS, IN SOME FRENCH VILLAGES, PEOPLE ORGANIZED A FESTIVAL IN MAY TO BRING A GOOD HARVEST IN THE FALL...

THE MAY FESTIVAL?

HALT!

WE ALL [illegible] TO SING SOME TRADITIONAL [illegible] FROM HOUSE TO [illegible] SOME CAKE.

TO IMAGINE [illegible] MENT

IN THESE TIMES THE [illegible] NOT [illegible]

TO US [illegible] NUMBERS FROM STREET [illegible]

[illegible] WAS A [illegible] MOMENT EVERY TIME [illegible] ADULTS AND [illegible] CHILDREN ALIKE

HA HA HA! YOU'D BETTER GO HOME GIRLS

I THINK WE'LL [illegible]

At any rate... not until that night.

VVVVH

EXACTLY WHERE THE CASTLE OF THE MAN IN BLACK IS.

SAH...

HUH? THAT'S WEIRD... THERE'S A RED LIGHT BEHIND THE HILL...

ZOH!

...I would never have seen... all those things...

If I had not gone...

I don't know what took me... I suddenly decided to go see where that red light was coming from by myself.

Near a little well, an unusual scene was taking place...

...as well as four strange figures which leapt about.

A strange red light was coming out of that well.

It shone on the man in black...

The others took a great number of poses.

One of them played a musical instrument.

All the movements of these four characters...

In fact...

...seemed to have only one goal: to make the lady standing before them laugh...

A woman... of incredible beauty! So beautiful that she could not be human!

BUT IT WAS TO NO AVAIL

BECAUSE THEIR DANCES, THEIR EXPRESSIONS THE MUSIC ITSELF WERE ALL QUITE RIDICULOUS

HOW COULD YOU TELL THAT THEY WANTED TO MAKE HER LAUGH?

Not only the women did not Laugh... she did not move a single muscle!

Their corneal nerves, ducts and sacs were in pain

GO-OHH

FRANCINE ... WHY... AREN'T YOU LAUGHING?

YOU DON'T FIND THEM AMUSING?

I WILL SHOW YOU FARCICAL AND RIDICULOUS NUMBERS...

...WITH SOME HELP FROM THE VILLAGERS NEXT DOOR!

HE HE HE HE...

SO THAT YOU CAN FINALLY LAUGH!

IN THAT CASE... I WILL HAVE TO SHOW YOU SOMETHING EVEN FUNNIER...

AAAAAHHH!

...that none of the beings around that well were really alive!

I ran away, despite the fear that paralyzed me!

I do not really know how I did, but... I understood...

I TRIED TO CONVINCE MYSELF THAT I HAD JUST HAD A NIGHTMARE.

I TRIED TO FORGET WHAT I HAD JUST SEEN.

And... even that man...

That woman...

Those performers...

SO? WHAT HAPPENED AFTER-WARDS?

I COULD NOT FORGET WHAT THAT MAN HAD SAID.

UNFORTU-NATELY, I WAS NEVER ABLE TO FORGET THAT TERRIBLE NIGHT...

UHM ...

ON THAT DAY, OUR VILLAGE DISAP-PEARED.

Uhm!

... AND?

SHORTLY AFTER...

THE FESTIVAL TOOK PLACE IN THE VILLAGE.

GUY! WE'RE AT THE CLIMAX OF THE STORY!

IT'S RATHER COLD OUT HERE... WOULD YOU RATHER NOT GO TO A WARMER PLACE AND HAVE A LITTLE GLASS OF WINE?

WHAT IS IT, GUY?

Fhh

It's not cold at all!

UHM! LISTEN TO ME FOR A MINUTE!

WHAT ?!

VOLOM VOLOM

VERY WELL...

YOU CAN FREEZE TO DEATH, I DON'T CARE!

MOMMYYY!

SHUT UP! DIDN'T YOU WANNA KNOW EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS WHOLE AFFAIR TOO?!

I'M VERY SICK...

HEUH

HEUH

LET US GO TO THE BASEMENT ...

... OF THE CASTLE

YOU'LL BE EVEN MORE SURPRISED WHEN YOU GET TO THE BASEMENT!

THAT'S PRETTY SURPRISING! THERE'S AN ELEVATOR IN THIS CASTLE?!

...WHY?

SHUWN

WOW!

WHERE ARE WE?

WHOA ...

NARUMI, CAN YOU HELP ME OPEN THIS BOTTLE? LET YOUR BRUTISH FORCE BE USEFUL FOR SOMETHING, AT LEAST ...

...

NARU-MI!

IT IS NO LONGER IN USE...

WE ARE IN THE FORMER HEADQUARTERS OF THE SHIRO-GANES.

HM...

UH...

IS IT...

SHE IS THE "WITCH" WHO CAME TO OUR VILLAGE DURING THE MAY FESTIVAL.

SO... THAT MEANS...

THAT WOMAN ...

SO THAT NO SHIROGANE WOULD EVER FORGET THAT DAY, SHE PAINTED THIS PORTRAIT AND HUNG IT HERE.

TANIA WAS A GIFTED PAINTER.

SHE IS ALSO THE HEAD OF THE "MIDNIGHT CIRCUS" WHICH IS STILL ACTIVE SOMEWHERE IN THE WORLD...

SHE IS THE HEAD OF THE AUTOMATONS THAT WE SHIROGANES TRY TO DESTROY BY ANY AND ALL MEANS.

THIS IS THE ONE THAT THE AUTOMATONS CALL "MISTRESS FRANCINE".